

# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



## Peleg S. Robinson 1826-1900

Peleg Sprague Robinson of Gardiner is representative of hundreds of 19th century Maine men who constructed the buildings they designed and manufactured the building materials they used. In Robinson's case, a house and a commercial block planned by him provide insights into the rapidly changing architecture of the pre-Civil War period.

Peleg Robinson was born in Gardiner on February 10, 1826. On November 17, 1847, he married Nancy Elizabeth Jewett of Alna, and they had four children.<sup>1</sup> Nothing is known about his training.<sup>2</sup> In 1850, at the age of 24, he established himself in his native city as a carpenter and joiner who planned buildings and furnished estimates, sawed and planed timber, manufactured doors, sash, and blinds, and produced tools for the local ice industry.<sup>3</sup>

Robinson's first known commission is the house on Maine Avenue in Farmingdale which he designed and built in 1854 for his brother-in-law Hartly W. Jewett.<sup>4</sup> Jewett's large clapboarded frame dwelling reflects several mid-19th century design characteristics. Instead of having a traditional symmetrical facade which fronts the street, a two-and-a-half story gable end faces Maine Avenue, and the primary entrance is located in the left bay of the south wall. This side hall plan, a relatively new innovation for the 1850s, locates the first floor parlor and the principal second floor bedroom to take advantage of views of the Kennebec River. The exterior features a heavy Gothic Revival molding over the doorway and an exaggerated roof overhang with large decorative brackets.

A local newspaper, the *Gardiner Saturday Evening Transcript*, praised Hartly Jewett's new house in its August 19, 1854, issue:

Mr. Jewett's is nearly completed. It was built by Mr. Peleg S. Robinson, a young Mechanic of this city, and reflects equal credit to him as an Artizan and Mechanic. It is a fine house, neatly and elegantly finished, with every convenience that could be asked for. The materials were of the best quality, and the whole cost it is said will exceed \$5,000.

Two years later another Gardiner newspaper, *The Northern Home Journal*, hailed Peleg Robinson's other

known commission, the Foster Block on Water Street in Gardiner, as "an ornament to our city, of which we may all be proud"<sup>5</sup> (Figure 1). What merited this description was the Block's advanced detailing and materials. Italianate in style, the facade displayed a series of cast iron pillars and arches across the first story, behind which were recessed two shop fronts and the entrance to the upper floors. In Maine, as in the rest of the nation, cast iron was a new structural and decorative building material. Maine's first known use of cast iron in this manner had come only four years before in 1852 when architect Thomas J. Sparrow included a cast iron first story and window caps on the Mussey Block in Portland. *The Northern Home Journal* spoke admiringly of such features on the Foster Block by stating, "The heavy iron pillars and arches on its front give it a grand look that is rarely seen in Down East architecture."<sup>6</sup>

The second and third stories of the facade were constructed of brick with quoins at either side, and a



Figure 1. Foster Block, Gardiner, 1859 view (Gardiner Public Library).

bracketed wooden cornice capped the roof. Each window had an arched cast iron lintel which was richly ornamented with decorative detailing. The brickwork was covered with mastic to give it the appearance of stone. Regrettably, there is no record of which foundry cast the ironwork, and those lintels which survive on the third floor do not match with any designs in period catalogues.

Peleg S. Robinson continued in business in Gardiner for approximately forty years after completing the Foster Block. In March, 1860, he entered into partnership with John F. Merrill, and together they erected a carpentry shop and planing mill on Bridge Street (Figure 2). Listed among their services were "plans and estimates for buildings furnished at short notice..."<sup>7</sup> This shop and mill were destroyed in the Gardiner fire of April 25, 1860, at a loss of \$2,000, but were immediately rebuilt and in operation the following month.<sup>8</sup>

The firm of Robinson and Merrill remained in business until March, 1863, when Peleg Robinson assumed sole ownership.<sup>9</sup> By this time, sash, door and blind manufacturing had become a feature of the enterprise and continued to be until Robinson retired from his Bridge Street location in 1896. Although he had stopped advertising "plans and estimates" by 1872, he did not cease work as a carpenter until his retirement.

Peleg S. Robinson's wife died on September 27, 1875, and he followed her a quarter of a century later on December 29, 1900.<sup>10</sup> They are buried in Gardiner's Oak Grove Cemetery. The *Daily Reporter-Journal* paid tribute to Robinson by describing him as "upright and just in all business transactions, a citizen enjoying respect and confidence of the entire community in which he lived, and whose character was beyond reproach."<sup>11</sup> Clearly, he produced more than the Jewett House and the Foster Block in his long career, and it is to be hoped that future research will reveal more of the work of this talented designer and builder.

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.  
June, 1986

**ROBINSON & MERRILL,**  
**House Carpenters & Joiners,**

Would respectfully inform the citizens of Gardiner and vicinity, that they have rebuilt their

**SHOP ON BRIDGE STREET,**

and have fitted it up with all the requisite machinery to enable them to execute promptly and faithfully all work intrusted to them.

**Planing, Straight and Crooked Sawing,**  
one at the shortest notice.

**SASH, DOORS AND BLINDS,**  
Supplied to order.

Plans and estimates for buildings furnished at short notice, and particular attention will be given to the repairing of buildings.

Having every means at their command, with a determination to faithfully and promptly execute all work intrusted to them at reasonable prices, they respectfully solicit a share of public patronage.

PELEG S. ROBINSON.                      JOHN F. MERRILL.  
Gardiner, June, 1860.                      23

Figure 2. Robinson and Merrill Advertisement, *Gardiner Home Journal*, 1860 (Gardiner Public Library).

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Gardiner Daily Reporter-Journal*, December 31, 1900.
- <sup>2</sup> Perhaps Robinson attended the Gardiner Lyceum, which offered courses in architecture and carpentry.
- <sup>3</sup> *Gardiner Daily Reporter-Journal*, December 31, 1900.
- <sup>4</sup> *Gardiner Saturday Evening Transcript*, August 19, 1854.
- <sup>5</sup> *Northern Home Journal*, Gardiner, October 2, 1856.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> *Gardiner Home Journal*, March 8, 1860.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., May 3, 1860; May 31, 1860.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., March 23, 1863.
- <sup>10</sup> *Gardiner Daily Reporter-Journal*, December 31, 1900.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.

#### LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY PELEG S. ROBINSON

Hartly W. Jewett House, Maine Avenue, Farmingdale, 1854, Altered.  
Foster Block, Water Street, Gardiner, 1856, Altered.

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